

ON THE TRAIL OF THE KOUPREY OR INDO-CHINESE FOREST OX (*BIBOS SAUVELI*)

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(With three plates and two text figures)

In 1944 I saw a pair of horns of a strange wild ox in a shop selling Chinese herbs as medicine in Bangkok. These were unfamiliar to me since they did not belong to the gaur, banteng, buffalo or gayal which are known to exist in this part of the world.

The horns were about the size of a banteng's, but curved in a curious manner. About 13 inches from the tip the surface covering was split, forming a collar of long shredded strips around each horn. These strips were 0.2 to 0.3 inches wide and 4 to 8 inches long. The distance between the bases of the two horns was only $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches and the forehead was slightly convex, not concave as in the banteng or the gaur. I purchased this pair and enquired of many of my friends, but could get no information about them.

Towards the end of the same year I found two more similar pairs of horns in a Chinese pawn shop. These two were smaller in size, rather flat, and curved like those of the Lesser Koodoo of Africa. The distance between the horns at the base was about 3 inches and the frontal bones were also not concave. This led me to believe that these belonged to cows, and the first pair to a bull, of some unknown species.

After enquiries of many hunters and naturalists in Siam I finally learned from an old gentleman, Phra Abhai Vongse, who had lived in Cambodia in his youth, that these were the horns of a kind of wild ox called by the Cambodians 'Kouprey' (wild ox) and by the Lao people 'Vua Ba'. The animals were apparently plentiful in the jungles of north-eastern Cambodia where he had hunted them about 20 years ago near Chongkal, but without success.

In January 1945 I led an expedition to northern Cambodia in search of these animals. We started from Kralann (or Phibul Songkram) going up north passing the villages of Ban Mong, Srae Parang, Talok, Varin, Srae Noi, Lavia, Tapeng-Sang Kae, Srae Kandal (Sarong Sangkae), Tapeng and Prey Weng. Some photographs of the three pairs of horns mentioned above were taken along with us and we made enquiries in the villages on the way. During the first fortnight we met no one who knew anything about these animals, but after travelling about 200 kilometres we came to a village called Prey Weng where we got the first information of their occurrence from an old hunter. He claimed to have hunted them often and stated that they could be found in the forests of Tapeng Chook and Phrom Dhep

further north and eastwards. Having spent two weeks collecting this information we ran short of rice, being unable to get sufficient quantities from the villages around. We, nevertheless, decided to proceed with our expedition living largely on the meat of wild animals.

About a day's walk from Prey Weng we reached the Tapeng Chook which was an open forest on flat rolling hills. Here we found the first definite signs of Kouprey in the form of old footprints. They were mixed with banteng tracks. The local hunters could distinguish the Kouprey tracks without hesitation as they were longer and blunter in front. The tracks were however several months old having been made during the last rainy season.

Many herds of banteng were found feeding on the plains and we also saw many Thamin or Brow-antlered deer (*Panolia eldi*). Two fine bull banteng were shot mainly for meat. After 5 days we were compelled, by the scarcity of rice, to move further to a village called Anlongpoom. Here too only very small quantities of rice were available, the local people having to live on roots dug out from the neighbouring forests.

At Anlongpoom we were again unlucky with Kouprey though we saw many new tracks. Two bull banteng and a thamin were shot. The former, which are not much hunted here, feed and stay almost the whole day in the plains and in the open forest. These habits are quite different from those found in Siam.

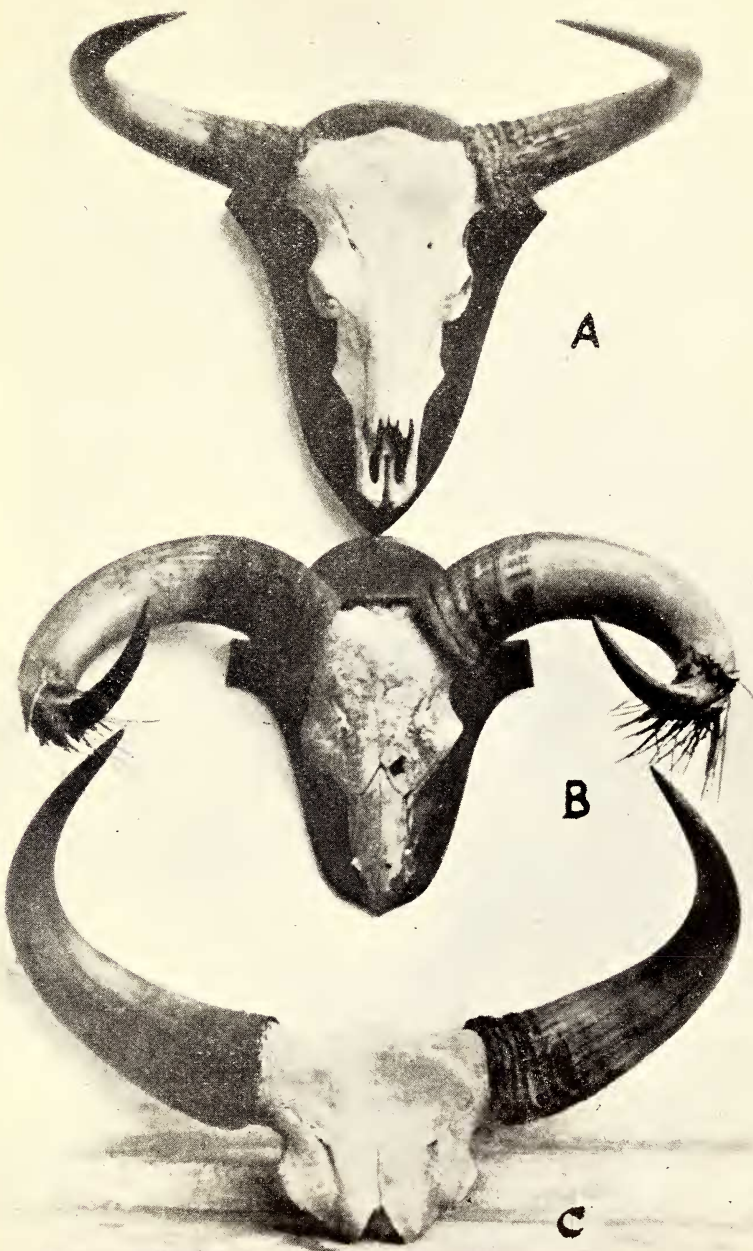
After three days at Anlongpoom we moved to a forest called Kabal Kamode meaning 'Corpse Skull'. There being no village here, we camped near a pond. Fresh tracks of Kouprey and other large animals were numerous, and on the first morning my companion Mr. Poon Pan followed up the fresh tracks of two bull Kouprey which were keeping together. He came up to them at about nine in the morning while they were still feeding in the open forest. He noted that both the bulls were grey which turned dark in certain areas e.g. in front of the shoulder, on the neck and face. He did not observe any brown at all. He noticed their long and hanging dewlap. Near the tips of the horns of both of the animals were big 'collars' formed of shredded strips and brushy in appearance.

A bull dropped to his first shot, but repeated misfires due to old ammunition obtained during the war permitted it to stagger away.

Poon Pan came back to camp and we both went out and followed the wounded animal until dusk, and though we found a few pools of blood where it had lain down we were unable to catch up with it. We stayed here for 3 days, but only got two bull bantengs.

From Kabal Kamode we travelled eastward to Koh Ke or Prasat Yai and Phra Abhai alone saw six herds of banteng. At Koh Ke there was a pyramid-like monument or chedi with several storeys, and a big ancient palace nearby. Not far from the wall of this palace I found a large herd of banteng and bagged a big bull with fine horns. As there were no tracks of Kouprey we moved the next morning to Tapeng Ra Vieng. Here we found new tracks of Kouprey and also wild buffalo, banteng, gaur and wild elephant. We followed the Kouprey tracks for 5 days, but the ground was too dry for success.

One day at about noon Mr. Poon Pan and his guide were resting under the shade of a tree near a pool. A herd of four Kouprey passed



A. BANTENG ♂

P. KOUFREY ♂

C. GAUR ♂



Photos

KOUPREY ♀

GAUR ♀

BANTENG ♀

Author

nearby, but scenting them they made off at a slow trot. Poon Pan upon hearing them ran after the herd; being unable to approach the

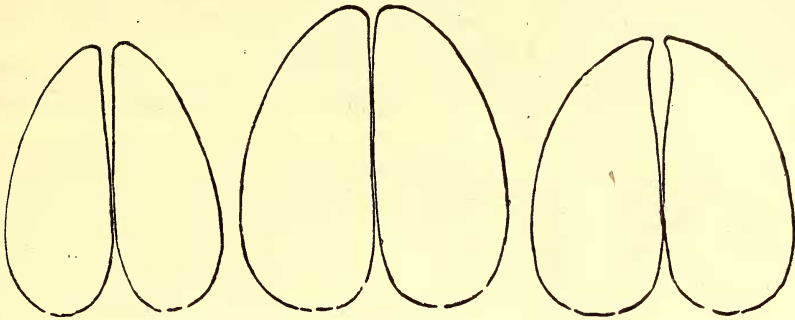


FIG. 1

KOUFREY

GAUR

BANTENG

Spoor of Bulls.

big bull which was running in front, he shot the last animal which turned out to be a fine cow.

When I heard this good news, I hurried to the spot and arrived there at dusk taking such pictures as the light permitted. The whole body was greyish-white, lighter on the abdomen but darker in front of the forelegs, at the neck and on the face below the level of the eyes. It had also white stockings on its feet which, however, did not contrast strongly with the grey of the body. It had a well defined dewlap, though not as long as in a bull. It had also long white hairs inside its ears. The dorsal ridge was not as high as in the gaur and terminated in the middle of its back as in the banteng. There was no white patch on the buttocks. The horns were twisted as shown in the picture. There was no horny shield between the bases of the horns as in a bull banteng. Its nose was peculiarly notched. The tail was longer and bushier than that of either gaur or banteng. I obtained the body measurements, but unfortunately I have lost them. Speaking from memory, it was about the same height as a gaur and banteng, but the body was not so thick being flatter on both sides, the presence of the long dewlap accentuating this effect. The animal looked leggier than the banteng.

On the following morning I came upon a small herd of Kouprey feeding in open forest. My guide saw them first when they were about 200 yards from us and whispered 'Kou! Kou!' pointing to them with his hand. It took me some time to pick them out as their colour at this distance looked like a greyish fog. In this herd I saw a calf about 3 feet high, greyish white all over without any brown as in a young gaur. Having already shot a cow, we were looking for a bull, but this herd consisted only of three cows and the calf.

As far as I could observe while following up their tracks, they appeared to feed and rest on the open plain and in open forest avoiding densely wooded areas unless very much disturbed by men. They

lived in herds sometime numbering twenty or more. There were also solitaires as in the gaur and banteng. They appeared to be fierce animals butting at objects in their way—sometimes even at the stumps of trees or an ant hill—a stump about the thickness of a man's arm being broken in two and thrown some distance.

While following a herd which had not been shot at, I found some drops of blood which might have resulted due to fighting within the herd.

Distribution.—I found the Kouprey in the country between Chongkal and Melonprey and the Dongrag range on the border between Cambodia and Siam. I also learnt from Prince Petcharaj, a Lao prince, that he had hunted them west of Kratie, southwest of Stung Tren, Voeung Sai, Pakse and Saravane. The northernmost place where he had found the Kouprey was Se Bang Nuan River, a little north of Saravane, but not beyond the river.

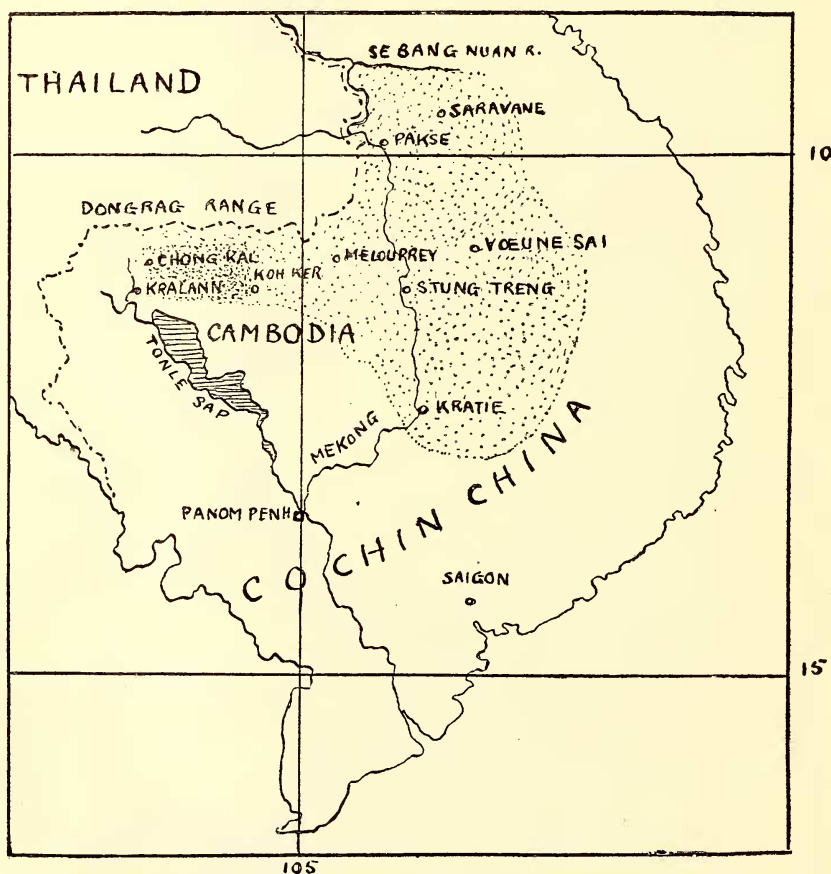


Fig. 2. Map of Cambodia showing distribution of Kouprey (dotted areas)

I was also reliably informed by the Siamese that 30 to 40 years ago there were many Kouprey north of the Dongrag range.